

In Defense of Elections

Traditional left-wing thought treats elections as epiphenomenal: build a strong enough social movement and politicians will be forced to do what you want. In this view, it doesn't really matter who gets elected since they're ultimately all subject to the same structural forces. Working to get someone "good" elected is really just a waste of time, since they'll turn out to be as bad as all the others once they get into office.

(Think Noam Chomsky's comments about the unimportance of electoral politics, or the Alinskyite theory that one should try to cultivate an attitude of "fear and loathing" among politicians.)

There's clearly a great deal of truth to this — structural forces are ultimately very powerful. But I think it misses a great deal as well. This model assumes politicians are this separate class of rational actors who respond purely to electoral incentives; if your grassroots movement gets them votes, they'll help you out, but they're just as happy to sell you out to a higher bidder.

But what if the politicians involved are actually activists themselves? What if the choice isn't between joining a electoral campaign and joining an issue campaign, but between starting a electoral campaign and starting an issue campaign? Here I think the calculus changes wildly.

For one thing, just at the campaign level, electoral campaigns have a lot of advantage over issue campaigns. They fit into a designated "news hole" so it's easier for the media to cover them, they have clear deadlines which spur people to action, and there's a clear existing model for how to do them (including fundraising, scheduling, volunteer management, etc.).

Furthermore, if you actually win, you can now continue the campaign from a much stronger institutional base: you'll have a full-time salaried staff, your pronouncements will be *de facto* news, and there will be strong social pressure preventing the whole thing from fizzling out as people decide to do other things with their lives.

Of course, there's also the positive impact you can make as an officeholder. Obviously you'll be able to help institutionalize your goals by passing laws and regulations you support (just as you would try to push as an outsider), but you'll also be able to promote things in innumerable smaller ways, just by meeting with other politicians and using the influence of your office. Take this story from Matt Taibbi about Bernie Sanders, the socialist Senator from Vermont:

[He] kept coming back to a story about his very first meeting with the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. At the meeting, the subject of the Head Start program had come up. Ted Kennedy, who runs the committee, had proposed a modest increase. Sanders wanted more—so he went and had a word with Kennedy after the meeting.

"The end result is that we got a 6 percent increase, instead of a 4 percent increase," he said. "Over a three-year period, that's five hundred million dollars more. What I'm finding out is it's just a different world. Not saying it's better, it's just different. If you want something you just go talk to someone in the hall. [...]"

He tried to sound like it was a good thing, and it might very well have been, in terms of getting more money for a worthy-enough program. But the subtext of this story was Sanders expressing amazement that he could get \$500 million just by talking to someone. As any human being would, he looked blown away by the reality of his situation.

(*The Great Derangement*, 127)

Obviously there are few offices as powerful as United States Senator, but every job has opportunities for simple victories like these, if at a much smaller scale. Sure, outside groups can always try to push officials to do things like this, but if you actually are the elected official you can just do them. (Plus, how often do outside groups know about these simple things?)

The late Senator Paul Wellstone, who came to electoral politics from grassroots organizing himself, argued that political change had three parts: the intellectual work of discovering what's wrong and how to fix it (i.e. policy development), the organizing work of mobilizing citizens into activist groups, and the electoral work of running for office and getting elected. And it seems that the left seems to neglect the last of these.

For a young leftist, a career in academia or the think tanks is an easy choice, while those who are bolder go into full-time activism. But running for office never seems like a viable option. (When people ask Noam Chomsky how they can fix things, he never says they should run for office.) (We'll ignore for a moment the delusion the left seems to have that they should run for office as a third-party in a two-party system.) The result is a severe deficit of genuine leftist candidates. Which of course feeds their sense that politicians are just going to sell you out.

Leftists need to think more about running for office. Not as an alternative to advocacy or activism, but as an extension of it. Campaigns are an incredible opportunity to explain and fight for the issues you believe in, while elected offices are a great opportunity to achieve them. That's how [the left took Santa Cruz](#), probably the only real city in the country with a leftist government, and that's how they'll take the country.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

March 9, 2009